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ABSTRACT

Now that senior high school English teachers are once more under pressure to teach literary masterpieces, they may find help in some of the practices of creative English teachers in the post-Sputnik era (1957-1963). Those practices worked. Not only did the kids meet great authors and their books, but the encounters were relatively painless. In fact, most kids and teachers enjoyed the experience. In the meantime, what happened in high school English classes met the demand of all those who sit in distant offices and render judgments on those who do the work. The practices included (1) having the teacher become part of the class and taking the students along on an adventure; (2) showing students what the teacher finds enjoyable in the literature; (3) challenging students to find things to like that the teacher has not seen; (4) inviting students to look in literature for relevance to their lives; and (5) helping them discover the universals in literary works. (MS)

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Romancing the Monuments

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Now that senior high school English teachers are once more under pressure to teach literary masterpieces, they may find help in some of the practices of creative English teachers in the post-Sputnik era (1957-1963). Those practices worked. Not only did the kids meet great authors and their books, but the encounters were relatively painless. In fact, most kids and teachers enjoyed the experience. In the meantime, what happened in high school English classes met the demands of all those who sit in distant offices and render judgments on those who do the work. We dusted off the monuments of literature for another generation.

In the post-Sputnik era, school superintendents were on trial for not having beaten the Russians, and they were desperate to find panaceas for their problems. Recommendations came from all sorts of experts, most often from persons who had spent little time in the high school English classroom. For example:

One middle-aged associate professor from a nearby state university met with high school English departments in the region and explained to them in a patronizing but friendly way a surefire solution for their problem. He and others on a committee at that state university had decided that high school English teachers should eliminate all punctuation, spelling, and grammar problems in student writing and thus leave college teachers free to teach the more complex concerns of the writer. His committee had decided that high school teachers could best eliminate such elementary errors by having every student rewrite every paper as many times as necessary to make it completely free of "mechanical problems." This meant, the gentleman explained, that a student might have to rewrite a paper as many as five or six times, the teacher checking it carefully for errors each time.

No doubt the high school teachers sympathized with the associate professor and his committee, but they found his suggestion less than practical. It was not just the number of times they would have to read student themes written on a single topic; they knew how boring the process would be for their students. High school kids were working hard in the post-Sputnik era, for they really wanted to beat the

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Russians, but teachers knew there could be a limit to the cooperation of even the best senior high students. Yet one imagines that the associate professor was rewarded for his efforts by promotion to full professor. It is done that way in college.

About the same time, college English departments were concerned about methods of teaching literature in high school. A department head from still another state university presented firm recommendations about literature teaching to all of those secondary school teachers who appeared at his conference on literature teaching at one of those regional English meetings. In his college classes, as in many colleges in the United States at that time, the fashion was to teach all literature by a single method, something influenced by the New Criticism. The method was termed "the close reading of the text." The teacher was absolutely prohibited from introducing any materials from history, biography, philosophy, psychology, or cultural traditions. The speaker explained that this was the one appropriate method for teaching literature at all levels, junior high, or lower, through graduate school. One should treat the study of literature more or less as one might teach quantitative analysis in chemistry class. The recommendation, like the other professor's recommendation on composition teaching, showed no understanding of high schools, of high school students, or of high school teaching loads. Most listeners shrugged their shoulders, determined to occasionally apply the New Criticism to a short story or a poem, but felt little guilt about doing what they had to do: connect the required subject matter of literature courses with the assigned students in the most practical way possible.

After all, high school teachers were and are the best authorities on the students in their classes. English teachers may obtain a broad general view of literature in college classrooms, but they learn to love literature by their personal reading of individual literary works, sometimes on a second or third or later reading. They obtain a general acquaintance with the theory of adolescent needs and behavior in college classes, but they learn to love and work with adolescent students by personal experience in the classroom, often in the second, third, or later years of teaching in the same school. Sometimes a first-year teacher might think that teaching could be wonderful if it were not for the students; experience would help. Sometimes outsiders might suggest that teaching would be easy if one were to use simple, easy books and forget the others; successful English teachers know better. In the post-Sputnik era, confronted with a rigid curriculum on the one hand and assigned classes of students on the other, creative teachers worked out

their own understanding of the placement of literature in a spiral curriculum, probably before Jerome Bruner gave the idea a name (in *The Process of Education*, 1960). They knew that one method would not necessarily fit both seventh grade and graduate school, even if they had not read Whitehead's essay on "The Rhythm of Education" (in *The Aims of Education*, 1929). They knew, for example, that an English major in college might study *Huckleberry Finn* or *Macbeth* at the stage of precision and that an upper division or graduate college English major might study these at what Whitehead called the stage of generalization (or criticism), but that high school students should encounter these great works at the stage of romance. They knew this without being told, for they knew how far they could stretch the energies of their students. With respect to their own students, they were experts.

Romancing a piece of great literature included a good deal of play. It was the kind of work Frost called "play for mortal stakes," but it could not exclusively be work and it must be more than just play. The experienced teacher learned to strike the right balance, moving year after year with similar students through prescribed surveys of world literature in translation, American literature, and English literature.

For what it is worth, the various college aptitude tests indicated that English teachers in the post-Sputnik era did a pretty good job. More important, many of their students left high school with reasonably good attitudes toward great books.

But education goes through cycles. Having lived through two cycles in my fifteen years as a secondary school teacher, I did not notice the next one at first, for I was teaching college classes and completing all of the degree work, the committee assignments, and the research projects one does to obtain tenure and promotion. When I became fully aware of the new cycle, it was already the dominant fashion in high school teaching. In a summer graduate class discussion, the chairperson of a shiny new high school in the region announced that "not twenty-five students in the entire high school" of about fourteen hundred could "study Shakespeare." Some of the other graduate students challenged that statement; his school was in a fairly prosperous community, with good parental support for the school. But I began reading articles on books on theory more carefully than I had done. Sure enough, they seemed to say that students could no longer handle difficult literary works. More than one of them seemed to single out British literature of the eighteenth century as being completely irrelevant, even for modern college students. One such statement was written by a

disenchanted college teacher who had specialized in the eighteenth century.

Frankly, I was depressed. There had been television in the post-Sputnik era, and that was getting some of the blame. There had been two-income families in that era, too, though not so many as there are now. Had the learning capacity of American young people changed in eight years? Maybe so. My freshman composition students did not write as well as freshmen had seemed to just a few years earlier. Being of an inquiring mind, and having obtained tenure, thus making a little risk-taking not too dangerous, I decided to make a cautious personal investigation of the matter. Having written an M.A. thesis on an eighteenth century writer, I had always enjoyed the major works of that time, perhaps even more than I appreciated some of the twentieth-century authors, though my Ph.D. dissertation had been on one of those. Now, any reader who teaches high school students knows that the only fair way to test such a theory is to teach full-time in a senior high, working with high school students in the backbreaking schedule of a real secondary school teacher. I was not that courageous, even if I could have worked it out. This was to be a timid little investigation.

We offered a course generally called "Introduction to Literature" as one of those hurdles required of all college students for graduation. In times of high enrollment, this had probably gone through the dreary "close reading" teaching process, serving effectively to eliminate early in their college careers those not deemed to be real college material. (Perhaps poor John Dewey had such a course at the University of Vermont and thus formed his lasting hate for literature.) With enrollments down, however, we were doing whatever we could do to attract students and keep them. So we had been for the last year or two disguising content somewhat with sexy titles, titles individual teachers could pick for their own sections. I advertised my course for fall as "Sin and Sanity in the Eighteenth Century." I did have to include a brief course description, however, and anyone reading that would know that the course would be a tough one. Because students could choose their own sections of the course, I expected to have in my section only bright kids, people who read all the time and whose high school teachers had mentioned one or more of the books on my list. It was to be a very timid investigation, with almost no risk for the teacher.

Surprisingly, enough students were enrolled in the course by midsummer for me to begin digging into the materials I had selected and ordered through the bookstore. On the list for the course were two novels, Fielding's *Tom Jones* (885 pages) and Smollett's *Humphrey*

Clinker (shorter, but more difficult for a young reader). There were also Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* as well as poems by Burns, Pope, Gray, Goldsmith, and others. (By mutual agreement, teachers were to include some fiction, some drama, and some poetry in each section of this course; otherwise, they were on their own.) I looked forward to teaching a sort of junior course in the eighteenth century, assuming that the students were the bright kids I expected them to be.

Soon after Labor Day I met that class for the first time. Like the freshmen in my composition classes, they were reasonably friendly and well-balanced. Their class cards indicated that there were no English majors in the group. Like most of our university students that year, they were aiming toward careers in business or technology or in teaching some of the subjects for which teachers were still in short supply. The notes they wrote on their class cards about their favorite books, if any, did *not* show them to be the constant readers I had hoped for. After flipping through the cards, I became worried.

"How many of you chose this particular class because of your interest in the eighteenth century?" I asked.

One young woman who had come in late from registration held up her hand.

I was standing and felt a desire to sit down, but teaching is not for wimps. I kept my stance, but felt that I had been cornered.

"How did the rest of you get here?" I cried.

From various parts of the room came the single answer: "The registrar put us in here this summer because the freshman comp classes we signed up for were full."

Instead of crying, I grinned. You might as well. Then I told them about my horrible predicament. I explained that the books were in the bookstore and that the authorities in the bookstore would not let us return them to the publishers at this point; even if they would, they could not get different texts on the shelves for at least two weeks. It was a ten-week quarter, with an extra week for exams. They all laughed along with me, and we decided to do what we could about the mess, together.

I knew that this was a clear case for the application of Whitehead's romance method.

Any good high school teacher knows what I mean: you become a part of the class and take them along with you on an adventure, with no faking. You help them see what you have liked in the literature you are studying, and you challenge them to find things to like that you have

never seen. You invite them to look for relevance: a relationship between the eighteenth century and the twentieth, between Britain of that time and modern America. You help them discover the universals in the literary works: love and death and hate and jealousy and the plight of the individual in coping with the pressures of conscience, of family, of friends, of enemies and competitors, of society and destiny and all kinds of authority. You no longer worry about whether you are involved in one kind of criticism or another or whether their reading is close or a little way off. You help them find something worth talking about in the books, even if that something has to do with politics, history, religion, philosophy, psychology, sociology, or careers. You all think of *Tom Jones* or "To a Mouse" as a reading experience, particularly an *experience*, not as something set apart from life and called literature for the wrong reasons.

You know what I mean.

It worked. I collected teacher evaluations on a standard form, as usual. But I also collected separate, anonymous evaluations of all of the principal selections for study. The ordinary freshmen in this class said that *Tom Jones* was long, but well worth the effort; for several, it was the best book they had ever read. *Humphrey Clinker* got only average grades, but all of the rest of the materials were recommended for use in other literature classes. I saved their evaluations, so I know how important it was to romance the eighteenth century. I was in a corner, so I had to teach well.

If you find yourself in a corner with the new courses of study, try romance.

But remember: don't trust anything a college teacher says, even me.